

## **Activism in the Classroom: A Case Study on De-Patriarchalising Biblical Studies for Future Generations**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Efficient activism in the classroom and beyond is contingent upon the ability to identify and understand ideological principles, to express opposition to injustice, to challenge and de-centre authority and privilege, and to redistribute power to those without. Moreover, it requires collective and collaborative action. This article is a case study of an Honours course titled *Women and Gender in the Bible and the Ancient World*, which was delivered to students at the University of Glasgow in Spring 2019. The course itself was a form of feminist activism against oppressive patriarchal structures in biblical studies, and in academia more generally. Instructors made use of pedagogical tools that are not traditionally associated with the study of the Bible, and encouraged the development of community, both in the classroom and at the associated conference, to enable and empower student activism in a collaborative environment. This article charts the successes and failures of the course and conference and turns attention to the shape of feminist approaches to the Bible more generally.

### **KEYWORDS**

Feminism; Bible; Language; Community; Disruptive Activism

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## **Introduction**

In 2018/19, we developed a new Honours-level course called *Women and Gender in the Bible and the Ancient World*, to be delivered to students at the University of Glasgow. The course was proposed in response to students from a Level 2 course (*Texts & Cultures of the Bible*) who had specifically requested more material on the topic of women and gender in biblical studies.<sup>1</sup> The course was designed to address an imbalance in biblical scholarship and the teaching curriculum, which tend toward white, androcentric perspectives from the western world. The design aimed at providing tools for students, so that they could effectively challenge oppressive frameworks. Such tools might include, for example, opportunity and confidence to speak in front of their peers as well as members of staff, increased knowledge of oppressive forces at work both in reading the Bible and in institutionalised academic settings, and ways to organise events, to network and to evaluate the successes and failures of their actions.

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<sup>1</sup> To us, the demand for this course on the part of the students was a form of activism in itself.

The course in itself was a form of activism against oppressive patriarchal structures in biblical studies, and in academia more widely.<sup>2</sup> To achieve this, we made use of pedagogical tools not traditionally associated with the study of the Bible. For example, there was a focus on performance as pedagogy when we invited trans playwright Jo Clifford to perform her play *The Gospel According to Jesus, Queen of Heaven*<sup>3</sup> in the University's Memorial Chapel. There was also an emphasis on reflective praxis throughout the course, which is not routinely encouraged in traditional modes of biblical studies teaching, but is becoming more common in humanities programmes. Importantly, the reading list for the class consisted mostly of texts by women, nonbinary and trans scholars, and scholars of colour. Only three cis white male scholars appear in a list of over 100 titles.<sup>4</sup> This was an intentional choice which sought to reverse – in a small way – centuries of biblical scholarship that placed men's voices, opinions, criticism and reflections at the heart of all matters. Such pedagogical tools, which actively go against “traditional” modes of teaching and learning, were integral to a course which was clearly supportive of a feminist approach to the Bible.

Grounded in feminist epistemologies, we – teaching staff and students – sought from the outset to interrogate “the masterly meta-narratives of ‘correct’ scholarship” by demystifying, questioning, and deconstructing authoritative voices in biblical studies.<sup>5</sup>

The course culminated in a one-day conference, with papers delivered by established academics alongside students from the course (and one student not from the course but with overlapping interests) as a means of further destabilising and challenging typical

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<sup>2</sup> It is well known that traditionally, and historically, the academy caters for the education (and employment) of primarily men. Indeed, in the UK, women were not allowed to study at universities until the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1868 the University of London became the first university to allow women to sit exams. Instead of receiving a degree, women were awarded a Certificate of Proficiency. It would be another decade before women were allowed to enrol into full degree programmes. Even then, this practice was not widely adopted across the UK until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and then it was a practice which mainly benefited white, middle-class women. In relation to the study of theology, religious and biblical studies, these disciplines, too, have traditionally been male-dominated areas. A recent report published by the British Academy on the state of Theology & Religious Studies (TRS) in the UK highlights that at undergraduate level, almost two-thirds of students are women, but the proportion reverses in postgraduate taught and postgraduate research degrees, where men make up the majority. Additionally, the report found that TRS has “an ageing staff profile which is predominantly white and male”, a statistic which signifies “issues in both the diversity and the sustainability of the disciplines”. While our course could not possibly fix such systemic institutional problems, we recognised that we had an opportunity to at least begin to address those issues in the field of biblical studies, and to provide the tools and a framework for our students to take forward in their own academic careers. See: “Theology and Religious Studies Provision in UK Higher Education,” The British Academy, accessed 10 January 2020, <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/theology-religious-studies.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> For more information, including a script of this play, see: Jo Clifford, *The Gospel According to Jesus, Queen of Heaven 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition* (Edinburgh: Stewed Rhubarb, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> The full bibliography is available to view at: <https://womeninthebible4112.wordpress.com/bibliography/>. This strategy is part of the endeavour called decolonising the curriculum.

<sup>5</sup> Esther Fuchs, *Feminist Theory and the Bible: Interrogating the Sources* (London: Lexington, 2016), 2.

academic practice wherein less-experienced voices are not often given a platform – or at the least, are not often allowed to share a platform with those who are seen as their academic superiors. The course was further supported by a non-compulsory feminist Bible reading group (or FemBible, a nickname given to it by students) which further developed on themes of women-centric texts and added to the toolkit on offer to the students. Importantly, FemBible also allowed us to take classroom activism developed inside the lecture theatre outside of the classroom and into new settings with new participants.

In this paper, we will reflect upon the design and delivery of the course, which attempted to follow scholars like bell hooks who argue that de-centring “experts” is key to successfully challenging oppressive structures.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, we tried to heed the warning of biblical scholar Rhiannon Graybill, who urges us, as biblical interpreters, to be mindful that our positions are “never innocent; we are always implicated in situations, texts, and spaces of interpretation. There is no abstract vantage point from which all knowledge can be taken in; there is likewise no subject position that is wholly innocent or guilty.”<sup>7</sup> Such approaches, which will be discussed further below, are integral to our approach in class as teachers, and integral to students as learners. Using the example of our course, we will discuss the realities, the successes and the failures of an approach which sought actively to de-patriarchalise biblical studies using feminist, queer, LGBTQ+ and postcolonial hermeneutics, as well as addressing the wider implications of encouraging a feminist-centred activism outside of the classroom and academic settings.

## Language, Community and Activism

This course, the related conference and the reading group were conceived as a way of “working to transform the curriculum so that it does not reflect the biases or reinforce systems of domination.”<sup>8</sup> Essentially, and simply, we argue that activism is firmly rooted in two things: language and community. This is not to say that activism can ever be distilled into these two elements; it is of course much more complicated than that. However, we argue that activism is most efficient where there is a community of people working towards a common goal. Similarly, activism is most effective when it is built upon a shared and common language. bell hooks writes at length about the link between language and oppression, reflecting on the way in which oppressed, marginalised black communities were stripped of their mother tongues in the era of slavery, and forced to learn the language of their oppressors – English – a language which, hooks remarks, must have terrified them. Remarkably though, the language of their oppressors would become a way for black people to connect and form bonds with

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<sup>6</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Rhiannon Graybill, “Fuzzy, Messy, Icky: The Edges of Consent in Hebrew Bible Rape Narratives and Rape Culture,” *The Bible & Critical Theory* 15:2 (2019): 1-28, here 17.

<sup>8</sup> hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 21.

other enslaved black communities: “I imagine [black communities] hearing spoken English as the oppressor’s language, yet I imagine them also realizing that this language would need to be possessed, taken, claimed as a space of resistance.”<sup>9</sup>

Using the oppressor’s language as part of a toolkit to resist and challenge dominant social groups is a key feature also of Pierre Bourdieu,<sup>10</sup> and subsequently of Slavoj Žižek’s<sup>11</sup> work on symbolic violence. Žižek argues that symbolic violence is located in linguistic choices between powerful and weaker social groups, and Bourdieu suggests that linguistic interactions are indicative of participants’ respective positions in social settings. This, in turn, establishes who has a “right” to be heard, to interject, to question, to lecture, to impose their voice over others, as well as the degree to which that right is extended.<sup>12</sup> Thus, those in socially powerful positions use language to dominate and oppress those in weaker positions by weaponising the force of their perceived symbolic capital (markers of prestige, honour, attention etc.). The imposition of thought, principles and social structures (all of which are embedded in language) on to marginalised and oppressed social groups is itself, Bourdieu argues, an act of symbolic violence.

The importance of language in creating and maintaining oppressive structures is undeniable; but, as hooks recognises, the power and versatility of language is such that language can also be used to disrupt and disturb hegemonies.<sup>13</sup> This is where the second element of community comes to the fore. Esther Fuchs suggests that postmodern feminists “envision a community of and for ‘others’, not a multiplication of egos, devoted to the pursuit of goals dictated by the political sameness of autonomous individuals.”<sup>14</sup> In the same breath, she advocates for teaching feminist ideologies “as a political practice, and not as an abstract elitist activity”.<sup>15</sup> This speaks to the idea of community where (in our case) biblical studies is no longer reserved for the elite but is opened up to all who want to study the subject (although we acknowledge that universities themselves remain elite institutions not accessible to all – in fact, systems of higher education regularly discriminate against marginalised groups). By actively supporting the development of a community within our classroom through practices of creative pedagogies, disruptive texts and, importantly, highlighting stories of injustice in biblical narratives and making this relevant to current social issues, the classroom became a place where common interests, shared anger, and a need for

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<sup>9</sup> hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 169. There is a possible analogy here of utilising “academic speak” and academic tools to challenge oppression and injustice in the academy.

<sup>10</sup> For example, see: Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London, Routledge, 2010 [first published in 1979]); Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (California: Stanford University Press, 2002); Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond, eds. John Thompson (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (London: Profile, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, chapters 2-4.

<sup>13</sup> hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 167.

<sup>14</sup> Fuchs, *Feminist Theory and the Bible*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Fuchs, *Feminist Theory and the Bible*, 2.

social justice were vocalised. Community in the classroom developed around shared concerns. In turn, this meant students felt more comfortable both to listen to and to challenge others' opinions in a respectful yet critical manner.

Ideas of elitism, privilege and authority in the classroom were challenged from the outset of the course. Christopher Greenough describes queer biblical studies as "the anti-approach,"<sup>16</sup> adding that students in the queer classroom should expect the unexpected. He adds, "but it also holds the potential to be liberating and creative."<sup>17</sup> For us, a women-centred course should produce the same feelings of destabilisation. Additionally, we treated everything as political, not as "an abstract elitist activity."<sup>18</sup> Teaching feminism, gender, sex studies and the Bible/ancient world is itself and should always be a political practice, but it is also a practice of liberation from the patriarchy. bell hooks calls education "the practice of freedom" and for our course, this meant freedom from "traditional" biblical studies, movement away from the conventional style of lecturing, and resistance towards an academic system which is inherently discriminatory towards any student who has a disability, is from a poorer socioeconomic background, is a person of colour, is a carer, and so on. Advocating for a community in the classroom, which focuses on feminist and queer approaches to the Bible remains the first step to a collective movement of activists: "[w]hen we create this woman space where we can value difference and complexity, sisterhood based on political solidarity will emerge."<sup>19</sup>

Our pedagogical approach, then, centred on sensitization to language. But, just as *language* is important as a tool for challenging oppression, so is *listening*. Empathetic and meaningful listening is key to developing communal bonds. But it is a skill many lack. Karmen McKendrick warns against the common tendency to focus on what we can get out of a conversation, rather than listening to what is being said to us.<sup>20</sup> To counteract this, with reference to reading, Amy E. Farrell suggests Deep Listening: her term for shifting the perspective from one's own opinion, towards a conversation with a writer expressing an opinion which one challenges or resists. This can be one strategy for encouraging students to engage with complex or divisive topics in a meaningful way that can also expose preconceptions or stigmas.<sup>21</sup> Deep Listening became another integral part of community-building in our classroom.

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<sup>16</sup> Chris Greenough, "Activism in the Queer Biblical Studies Classroom," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies* 2.1 (Autumn 2020): 108–127, here 111.

<sup>17</sup> Greenough, "Activism," 111.

<sup>18</sup> Fuchs, *Feminist Theory and the Bible*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 110.

<sup>20</sup> Karmen McKendrick, "A Hermeneutic of Listening: A Note on Sacramental Strangeness", in *Phenomenologies of the Stranger* edited by R. Kearney and K. Semonovitch, 98-108 (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 107.

<sup>21</sup> Amy E. Farrell, "Teaching Fat Studies in a Liberal Arts College: The Centrality of Mindfulness, Deep Listening, and Empathic Interpretation as Pedagogic Methods", *Counterpoints*, Vol. 467, *The Fat Pedagogy Reader: Challenging Weight-Based Oppression through Critical Education* (2016), 61-69, 64.

As teachers, we were acutely aware that some of us still need to learn how to reflect on our positions vis-à-vis the need for feminism and queer approaches, for example. The critical tools we wanted to develop and encourage the students to take up were not just for reading the Bible, but for practising activism beyond the classroom. They were for dealing with, challenging and responding to toxic discourses that pervade everyday life – such as, issues relating to body image, sex work, gender violence, racial abuse and discrimination, and ethical pornography, for example. The course was, in the words of bell hooks (summarising the pedagogical approach of Paolo Freire)<sup>22</sup> aimed at encouraging “action and reflection upon the world in order to change it.”<sup>23</sup>

## Course Aims and Intended Learning Outcomes

The course, the reading group and the conference were centred upon the idea of studying in depth some of the narratives of female characters of the Bible and associated non-canonical texts,<sup>24</sup> alongside the critical literature on gender and ethics. Our aims included the opportunity to engage in close readings of selected texts about sex and gender from different divisions of the Bible and related texts, to relate these to a variety of religious and secular contexts, to discuss feminism, gender theory and queer theory and their intersections and applications in biblical scholarship, and, to become familiar with a range of theoretical interpretative approaches to texts.

The intended learning outcomes highlighted rigorous analysis of the historical, cultural and literary features of biblical texts about sex and gender, and their intersections with other axes of marginalisation. We particularly encouraged feminist approaches to the material, in the hope that students would be able to develop their own gender-politically-sensitive analysis individually and as a group.

## Description of the Course

Offered at Honours level for 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year students (and including the option for taught postgraduates to take the course),<sup>25</sup> this course consisted of ten two-hour sessions. Each

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<sup>22</sup> For example, see: Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin Modern Classics (London: Penguin, 2017).

<sup>23</sup> hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 14.

<sup>24</sup> The selection and canonization of the constituent texts of the Bible is itself an exercise in power and the conferral of privilege. On the one hand, it is important to investigate the very (biblical) texts that hold such power but, on the other, it is also important to draw attention to and to probe texts that were not included.

<sup>25</sup> Scottish undergraduate (UG) degrees tend to be of four-year duration. Years 3 and 4, therefore, constitute upper levels that build on at least 2 years of academic development. Taught postgraduate degrees (TPG) are usually Masters (MA) degrees of one-year duration. It is common for TPG students to attend upper-level UG courses and to write assessments of greater word length and requiring more in-depth engagement than those of UG co-students.



session usually took the format of student presentations, a short lecture on the topic of the week, and a plenary discussion with students and teaching staff. Both lecturers were present in the classroom for every class meeting. Weeks 2, 4 and 5 incorporated also specialist guest contributors.<sup>26</sup> Each week focused on a different topic: we explored topics such as constructions of sex and gender in the Bible, queer theory and its applications to biblical texts, intersectional approaches, and psychoanalytic readings. We focused closely on themes such as motherhood, sexual assault, sex work, and femme fatales, and we finished with a class on cultural afterlives of biblical women, drawing together many of the themes we had explored over the previous weeks. We wanted to provide a focus for combining feminist and intersectional theoretical approaches with texts that address women's lived experiences, so that it was possible to reflect in class not only on ancient texts about, for example, motherhood and infertility but also students' personal experiences of such; similarly, the discussion of biblical representations of sexual assault was an important opportunity for students to consider theoretical and political aspects of their own personal histories.

Students performed well in assessments, especially in the essays for which they were encouraged to choose their own topic and generate their own hypothesis. Though certainly not a new idea in Honours-level teaching, the idea of encouraging students to choose their own essay topics appeared to increase individual confidence in tackling difficult or contentious topics. This approach yielded better results as a whole, in part, because students could bring their interests and existing knowledge to a topic of their choosing, rather than selecting a topic from a set list, as in the first assessment. Overall, the grades for the course were higher than for any other course that year, which is a significant achievement given that enrolment was almost double the average.<sup>27</sup> We believe this impressive performance was due to students being highly engaged with the material.

## **Who was in the classroom?**

There was diversity among the student cohort in terms of religious identity, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and physical and mental health needs. Some were students of Theology and Religious (TRS), others were pursuing joint degrees with other Arts subjects and took this course as a supplement to their studies.

In such a mixed group, it was perhaps inevitable that various opportunities and challenges would arise. For example, students who were based in TRS often had better knowledge of the biblical text and of the various critical approaches to reading the Bible. However, students from outside TRS introduced new perspectives drawn from their own disciplines, which, in turn, often led to creative and innovative discussions of a more interdisciplinary nature. Interdisciplinarity – which in this course meant approaching a text

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<sup>26</sup> These were: Jo Clifford (playwright/performer), Emma Nagouse (postgraduate student, University of Sheffield), and Dr Anna Fisk (lecturer, University of Glasgow). See below.

<sup>27</sup> The class attracted a higher number of students than other Theology and Religious Studies courses on offer; there were 32 undergraduate students and 5 postgraduates. The majority were women.

with a variety of disciplinary and hermeneutical lenses, as well as assessing the impact texts have on cultural products – is vital in relation to studying biblical women. As Diane Apostolos-Cappadonna remarks, “the larger spectrum of interdisciplinary approaches to [the study of biblical women] facilitates our understanding not simply of the process of the afterlife of a biblical figure or narrative but also the cultural position of women within the societal contexts of the artist or patron’s milieu”.<sup>28</sup> And this was one core aim of the course.

One of the main challenges of working with such a varied group of students related to the topics we chose to focus on. Given the course was on women, gender, sexuality, and

### **Code of Conduct: Women & Gender in the Bible and the Ancient World**

#### **Trigger Warnings:**

Some of the topics in this classroom may be triggering. There will be discussions of sex, gender, fertility, violence, abuse, discrimination and visual portrayals of men and women. We promise to provide a trigger warning prior to any difficult content. Please feel free to leave the class, or work through the content in a manner most comfortable for you.

#### **In Class:**

It is a priority for us to provide a harassment-free environment for everyone, regardless of gender, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance, body size, race, age, or religion. Harassment of any form will not be tolerated. Anyone violating this code of conduct will be asked to leave the space immediately.

#### **Harassment includes, but is not limited to:**

- Verbal comments that reinforce oppressive social structures
- Non-consensual sharing of sexual images in public spaces
- Deliberate intimidation (e.g. stalking and following)
- Inappropriate physical contact
- Unwelcome sexual attention
- Advocating for, or encouraging, any of the above behaviour.

#### **Enforcement**

Anyone asked to stop any harassing behaviour is expected to comply immediately. If a person engages in harassing behaviour, we retain the right to take any actions to keep the classroom a welcoming environment for everyone.

#### **Reporting**

If someone makes you or anyone else feel unsafe or unwelcome, please report it as soon as possible. You can approach either Zanne or Sarah, or if you prefer, you can contact the Head of Theology & Religious Studies with your complaint.

<sup>28</sup> Diane Apostolos-Cappadonna, “Introduction”, in *Biblical Reception 5: Biblical Women and the Arts* (London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2019), 1.



power dynamics in the Bible, focus on such issues as abuse, trauma, ethnicity, classism, homophobia and other potentially harmful and discriminatory behaviours was central. Such material can potentially be triggering to students who have experienced trauma, abuse, or discriminatory behaviour. To manage this, we introduced a “code of conduct” in the first session, to which both students and staff members were bound (see above). The idea behind this was to ensure the classroom was a safe, comfortable environment where students could still engage with difficult and sensitive topics, but in a manner that protected vulnerable students. Students commented that by introducing the code of conduct in the first session, we set a tone for the coming weeks where students felt at ease and well-prepared to cover challenging topics. This first step came to be vital in carving out a space for encountering and stimulating activism in the classroom over the weeks to come.

### **Pedagogical Approaches: “action and reflection upon the world in order to change it”<sup>29</sup>**

The study of gender and sexualities with regard to the Bible, theology or the ancient world is of growing appeal to university students, and many universities now offer courses in and around those areas. In the post-#MeToo context,<sup>30</sup> our students have been confronted head-on with critical aspects of feminism, both in mainstream and online media and in their non-digital lives. While both teaching staff already had strong interests in the areas of feminism and queer identities in/and the Bible, it was timely as well as important that those interests shaped our offerings in the classroom.

We adopted a student-centred model of learning which was not concerned solely with the delivery of facts, concepts and principles, but which was focused on what the student did in the classroom and assessments, how that related to teaching content, and how well the intended learning outcomes were achieved. John B. Biggs and Catherine Tang refer to such a model as “level 3” teaching, and by focusing on “what the student does”, they mean that the “purpose of teaching is to support learning.”<sup>31</sup> In their model (based on a constructivist framework), there is an emphasis on students constructing knowledge with their own activities “and that they interpret concepts and principles in terms of the ‘schemata’ that they have already developed.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 14.

<sup>30</sup> We acknowledge that the various movements around issues of women’s rights, including reproductive rights, rights to equal pay and political representation, and to protection from gender-based and sexual violence, have been ongoing for many years, even decades. But it must be noted that the mass digital activist #MeToo movement beginning in late 2017 was particularly influential in highlighting a myriad of issues around women’s rights. Moreover, it captured the imagination and hearts of many campaigners and activists, including ourselves and our students, renewing our energy and focus on such issues.

<sup>31</sup> John B. Biggs and Catherine Tang, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (Open University Press, 2011), 20.

<sup>32</sup> Biggs and Tang, *Teaching for Quality Learning*, 22.

Simply put, a student-centred model of learning effectively places students in control of the classroom. Content, however, continues to be underpinned by the scholarship we engage with. Students become their own critics, as well as critical of others' opinions and interpretations. In this setting, teaching staff are effectively mediators and content providers. Some students began the course with more background in feminist theory and activism than others; and some students came from more traditional backgrounds where patriarchal interpretations of biblical texts had been considered authoritative. This was particularly evident when discussing LGBT approaches, and particularly when exploring the possibility of reading God or Jesus as queer. Occasionally, there were disagreements or differences of interpretation, such as in discussions of the differences between Vashti and Esther in the book of Esther. These were generally handled with politeness and civility by the students. The most acutely felt differences of perspective were expressed by students of colour and students from working-class backgrounds.

## Conference

To conclude the course and to draw upon and highlight the work of the students, we organised a conference, which was held on 29 March 2019 and which carried the same name as the course. The conference was a demonstration of the skills we had aimed to equip our students with during the course. For us – as teachers and students – the conference was a work of activism that disrupted the hierarchical conventions of academia by placing students at the front and centre of the day. The students were deeply involved in organising it: some were part of a panel which evaluated abstracts; some made decisions on whose papers would be accepted or rejected; others volunteered with logistical and administrative duties in the run-up to the conference and on the day. These inclusions of students in important decisions and roles was a way of empowering them beyond the classroom, increasing their confidence and demonstrating that we had confidence in their abilities.

The conference consisted of parallel panels (nine in total) and two keynote presentations: one by our own Sarah Nicholson, and one by Katie Edwards (University of Sheffield). Over one hundred delegates attended from institutions across the UK, Europe, and further afield. In total (not including the two keynote speakers), there were seventeen twenty-minute papers presented by established scholars, postdocs, postgraduate students, and church ministers. In addition, there were fourteen ten-minute papers presented by students from the course.<sup>33</sup>

Encouraging Honours students to present their work in sessions alongside more established scholars was potentially a risky undertaking, but it was a vision we had from the outset, and it was an integral part of demonstrating our idea of activism by disrupting

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<sup>33</sup> An outline of the conference, including titles of papers, is available to view online at:

<https://womeninthebible4112.wordpress.com/wagbaw-conference-2019/>. A selection of papers from the conference will be published in a forthcoming edited volume.

traditional conference structures. It was clear from ongoing discussions in the classroom and at our fortnightly FemBible, from presentations and essay choices, that our students were highly capable and – more importantly – willing to develop their research and present it on a bigger platform. Panel sessions were earmarked for undergraduate students, but the process for these was as for academic conferences: students each had to submit a title and abstract by a deadline, which was assessed by a panel of TRS staff members. If accepted, the students were expected to attend “conference surgery” sessions where they could receive one-on-one feedback on their abstracts and offered advice on developing the paper further.

Several of the academics who presented at the conference were known to the students through their work, which, in some cases, was included on reading lists from Level 1 onwards. The opportunity for undergraduate students to hear from and engage with these scholars cannot be overstated: it is undeniably exciting and encouraging to see a room full of women who have succeeded in building professional careers in academia despite the many challenges. The experience gave the students a sense of participation in a community of scholars in biblical studies. Several of the students in the Honours course aspire to academic careers and stated during the day of the conference that they were glad to meet and talk to women scholars who have influenced the development of their thoughts. The inspiration has carried some of them forward into developing their papers into submissions for publication. Some have already been accepted. The intersection and boundary crossing between learning community and professional academic community generated a feeling of inclusion, progress and dynamism that can get lost when biblical studies focuses only on the publications of dead white men.

It must be acknowledged that part of the sense of inspiration and achievement came from the hard work and input the students put into organising the conference, as well as from the community spirit which had developed between the volunteers. For many of our students, the opportunity to work with other students towards a common goal is not frequently encountered on campus, except in group projects and presentations that are prone to cause anxiety about the possibility of letting down, or being let down by their peers and losing marks. Working *with* peers has become increasingly reduced by a climate where most students work part time in paid work and have fewer opportunities to set up study groups or to participate in student societies or charities. Some students were unable to participate in the planning (on account of having caring responsibilities or reliance on paid work) but helped with practical assistance on the day. The experience of assisting with the planning and running of the conference allowed students to demonstrate their resourcefulness, critical engagement, confidence and adaptability. These are not only significant graduate skills but are also key skills in developing and maintaining their experience and stance as activists, particularly in the demonstration of community-building.

The conference was successful, too, in its aim of putting inexperienced yet capable students on the same platform as established scholars. Many attendees remarked that papers given by our students were on a level far higher than expected from undergraduate

and Masters students, and that the students delivered their research as competently as academics. From our students' perspective, they felt empowered by being given a platform to present research to an audience they knew would care, and many were left inspired and motivated to develop these skills by presenting elsewhere. Additionally, some students were invited to contribute to an academic blog series as a direct result of their presentations at the conference.<sup>34</sup> This in itself was seen as external validation of their work which delighted both them and us.

## **Feedback from students**

Many students, in their feedback, described the course as perspective-shifting, even life-changing. They noted the supportive and encouraging environment created in the class from the outset through the code of conduct, which fostered inclusion and the encouragement to participate in difficult discussions. Some noted that the course content was regularly shaped towards student interests (which they had perhaps discussed in previous weeks), and this in particular enabled students to develop their own activist-centred approaches to topics that mattered to them. There were several comments, too, on the feeling of community within the classroom, on the use of inclusive language, and on regular attempts to deconstruct traditional power structures.

There were some less satisfied comments also, which pointed out the lack of content on New Testament women (both teaching staff are Hebrew Bible scholars and so were less comfortable on NT ground), as well as the use of some terminologies and ideologies around sex work, which made some students uncomfortable. On this last point, frameworks for particular language and ideological choices were always set out at the beginning of the class (and in reading material leading up to the class), but it appears more clarification and discussion was required, and we regret that this was inadequate.

The course was successful in terms of delivering on both our initial aims and intended learning outcomes. More importantly though, it was also successful in providing tools for students to better understand and, in some cases, challenge frameworks which still oppress and impede them. This is evidenced in the feedback received, as well as in the ongoing community of staff and students engaged in feminist and queer Bible studies.

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<sup>34</sup> To give an example, representatives of "The Shiloh Project: Rape Culture, Religion and the Bible" (centred at the University of Sheffield but with a broad and international membership) approached students after the conference to invite contributions to their blog. To date, two of our students have published posts here. See: Sara Stone, "'The Man Said, 'The Woman Whom You Gave To Be With Me, She Gave Me Fruit From The Tree, And I Ate' (Gen 3:12): Shifting the Blame In The Story Of The Fall" and Siam Hatzaw, "'Until The Rain Poured Down From The Heavens On The Bodies': Rizpah And The Power Of Silent Protest."

## Successes

The whole course seemed to be highly successful in a number of respects, but there were particular moments that struck us as especially significant in terms of the development of community, of feminist activism, and of the students' intellectual engagement.

First, our approach of de-centring our perceived expertise and of sharing ownership of the material on the course with students (e.g. enabling them to shape discussions, even if it meant moving away from the original lesson plan, and encouraging them to add to the reading material if they found relevant scholarship we had not included) gave students a sense of shared responsibility for the course. Second, by bringing in three guest lecturers who shared a similar pedagogical philosophy to ours, but who were either from marginalised groups or who are early career scholars, we demonstrated in a concrete way how beneficial it is to include other voices, including "non-expert" or oppressed voices, in spaces which usually rely on an institutional idea of authority. In Jo Clifford's lecture, she encouraged students to write questions on cards about any aspect of trans theology or her own personal experience, which she then answered. This provided an opportunity and a safe space to discuss some sensitive and personal material such as many students had not previously encountered from an expert perspective not centred in institutional authority. Jo's understanding of Bible and theology informed her responses and hence the discussion, and foregrounded the importance of trans inclusivity in relationship with the Bible. This encouraged our students to consider not only academic discussions around trans theology, but lived experience too, a move which demonstrated how academia and individual lives intersect in a significant way.

We also invited PhD student Emma Nagouse to present her research on the little discussed and frequently misrepresented topic of male rape. Her interfacing of the language of Lamentations with imagery from the popular television series *Outlander* provided an accessible lens for students to explore male-male sexual violence, which is rarely discussed in biblical studies. This class enhanced understanding of the complexity of male rape, which is essential if taboos are to be resisted and confronted.<sup>35</sup>

Anna Fisk is a Glasgow-based scholar and attended several of the FemBible sessions, so she was known to some of the students. Her session provided a much-needed opportunity to move beyond the Hebrew Bible and into some of the other texts that are foundational for Christians. Her session generated some very useful discussion about women's roles in first-century Judea and about influential concepts such as sin, disease, virginity and love. Approaching these from a feminist perspective is activism.

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<sup>35</sup> See Emma Nagouse, "'To Ransom a Man's Soul': Male Rape and Gender Identity in *Outlander* and 'The Suffering Man' of Lamentations 3" in Caroline Blyth, Emily Colgan, and Katie B. Edwards (eds.), *Rape Culture, Gender Violence, & Religion: Biblical Perspectives* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 143-58. For another excellent resource on male rape and the Bible, which is also activism-focused, see Chris Greenough, *The Bible and Sexual Violence Against Men* (London, New York: Routledge Focus, 2020).

There were other highlights, too. Zanne Domoney-Lyttle's presentation on Silenced Women was delivered on International Women's Day 2019 (March 8<sup>th</sup>) and critiqued the dynamics of power in the Bible, in the classroom and in the world around us. The "lecture" was delivered silently using only slides, which highlighted topics of gendered violence, menstruation taboos, and the erasure of women's voices, both in the Bible and in contemporary parallels (e.g. in the news and in culture). Teaching staff remained silent for the whole lecture and gave over the space to students, who were encouraged to recognise the importance of their own voices as well as (paradoxically perhaps) the privileged positions they occupy compared with millions of women around the world. Student responses were overwhelmingly positive – many were in (emotional) tears – and they used their new-found platform to discuss effective and inclusive modes of activism, which could be drawn upon to lift up other voices with their own.

Sarah Nicholson's lecture on Esther focused on intersectionality. As a white person lecturing on intersections that include ethnicity, her lack of lived experience was inevitably a shortcoming. It also manifested the marginality of BAME scholars in biblical studies. But it seemed to us more important to discuss than to omit the topic, especially since feminist biblical scholarship on Esther provides a good opportunity for students to evaluate the ways that feminists focus on, or ignore, Esther's ethnic identity. This generated an uncomfortable discussion. The majority of students in the classroom were white, and had previously encountered critical race theory, so there was a degree of sensitivity to the material and to the people in the class who were visibly of minority ethnic heritage. But it remains the case that white feminists struggle to articulate a response to the challenges raised by their white privilege, both in society and in the academy, as well as to decentre themselves from their dominant positions. One way to do better is to have the topic introduced by a BAME/POC student or colleague – with the caveat that it may be unhelpful to expect anyone, student or lecturer, to act as representative of their heritage, or indeed all BAME people/POC. For the white people in the classroom activism as effective allies is important, but it is better to listen first. We have more to do to teach this important part of the course more effectively.

Our decision to share the classroom was an act of resistance in itself, given our context, where staff-student ratios are keenly patrolled. We resisted because feminism is collaborative. In our Honours class the presence of two lecturers with similar but different perspectives modelled collaboration, although the key collaborations were among all members of the class community. Students valued the diversity of perspectives in discussions and seemed to experience the course as empowering and liberating, offering ways to develop strategies to construct knowledge in partnership with each other and in dialogue with lecturing staff. This fostered their interest in activism, demonstrated when approximately half the class chose to skip one of the sessions to join the Global Climate Strike on 15 March 2019. We supported this choice although we remained in the classroom, because it was billed (at least locally) as a strike for school pupils and students. We did join the strike on 20 September 2019, when adults were encouraged to march alongside young people.



Student presentations are generally very good in our subject area at our institution. Nevertheless, we found that students seemed to be particularly highly invested in their presentations for this course and they delivered very well-researched and well-argued material that then informed their second essay, and in some cases work that led to conference presentations and submissions for publication. The opportunity to choose their own topics for the second essay encouraged students to engage with topics of personal and intellectual interest, and they took the opportunity to dismantle oppressive narratives pertaining to their own direct experience. Issues covered included racism, fatphobia, body image [body hair in particular] and sex work. This was facilitated by course content that disrupted oppressive biblical discourses by linking them to ongoing contemporary concerns such as period poverty, sex work policy, compulsory heterosexuality and sexual consent. Alongside these concerns we encouraged critical analysis of material in a wide variety of media, from Netflix and comics, to film and nineteenth-century news reports.

### **Areas for improvement**

From the perspective of fostering activism in the biblical studies classroom, there were some challenges, which in future will be given more consideration. For example, most students had not read much feminist theory prior to beginning the course. We did offer an extensive bibliography, which included many suggestions for background reading in feminist biblical scholarship. Moreover, feminist biblical scholarship was the focus of FemBible. It is important, however, to avoid overloading students with reading and to acknowledge that the relationship between theory and practice can be fuzzy at times. While some students became adept at putting ideas together in ways that were new to them, for others the amount of reading and complexity of feminist theory led to anxiety. A brief introduction to history of feminist thought would have been helpful to contextualise our perspectives and to generate students' ideas for their own activist priorities.

One anonymous feedback response was concerned with the use of the term "prostitute" in student presentations. This issue was discussed in the lecture but might have needed more attention. Concerns about language and content feed into larger issues about content advice and trigger warnings. Although, as feminists, we try to get to know our students – partly, because we care about them and partly, because knowing our students can help us to facilitate their agency and their learning – they certainly do not tell us everything, and the topics likely to be most triggering are also the topics most likely to silence students in the classroom. While we hope to be able to talk about virtually anything in the classroom, there always needs to be some kind of negotiation to determine what feels safe enough for the students in the room. This is more difficult with a bigger class, especially when some are from subject areas outside TRS and we haven't developed a relationship with them throughout years 1 and 2. Managing that negotiation is essential in order to confront systems of institutional oppression. It is also difficult.

Both these difficulties point to the necessity for reflection on our practice if we hope to engender transformation through our teaching. Without a clear articulation of theory, we cannot expect students to establish relationships between their experiences and their sense of agency; without a negotiation of what feels safe enough for public discussion, we cannot hope to articulate any confrontation of injustice.

## Concluding Thoughts

There are some limitations involved in any activism that takes place in and around a university classroom. It is difficult to build a counter-hegemony in the confines of university structures and in an environment largely populated by students and lecturers who enjoy and depend on considerable privilege. With reference to our course, there is the danger of reinforcing aspects of white feminism that have been robustly critiqued by intersectionality and critical race theory.<sup>36</sup>

One course cannot do or fix everything. This course did achieve something. The existence of a course focusing on women might be considered a success in itself. It is significant, too, that many students from the course have gone on to work on dissertation and Masters projects on feminist- and women-centred topics. But most compelling is the endurance of relationships between students and staff involved in the course – via FemBible, social media, and academic networks – where we see current and former students continuing to develop their critical consciousness, their engagement with women's liberation, and their analytical and political expressions. Many of those students are living at the intersections of multiple oppressions in addition to sexism, including ableism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, and ageism. It will therefore be difficult for them to find their way in the ableist, white, cishet, male dominated academy, but most of them are determined to make the attempt to have their voices heard. It may be impossible to measure success, but it is certainly possible to feel its effects.

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<sup>36</sup> Fuchs, among other biblical scholars, acknowledges this, noting that "the modernist self-presentation of feminist Biblical Studies as a method of liberation and democratization is effective and valid only to the extent that it is qualified by a postmodern understanding that its epistemology does not yet encompass all women, nor has it produced a discourse that is capable of addressing all possible interfacing of gender, race, sexuality, religion, and other structures of oppression." *Feminist Theory and the Bible*, 9. It is a concern that we share, but also one that must be seriously addressed when this course runs again.

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